

September 29, 1975

Mr. Edward McGlynn,
c/o Russell Sellers, Jr.
Laurel Sr. High,
Cherry Lane,
Laurel,
Md. 20810.

Dear Edward:

Thank you for your letter. The other day I mailed you a copy of my book, SOLAR LOTTERY, which has been reissued. In it there's a list of a few other novels of mine. You should get it soon.

I wrote "The Father Thing" years ago, back in the 'fifties, as I recall. Originally it was in a magazine. Last week an editor from France was here interviewing me, and he said that that particular story is my best-known work in his country; it's been reprinted again and again, he said.

In answer to your questions...I got the idea for "The Father Thing" from the fact that I was always afraid of my father, but for reasons I couldn't figure out. He always seemed a stranger to me; in other words, not my "real" father. In 1951 I began to write and sell science fiction and fantasy stories, and I got to thinking about how there probably were a whole lot of kids who were afraid of their parents for reasons they didn't consciously know. So I put it into a fantasy form. And then, also, I heard someone use the expression, "He's talking to himself," and that's what gave me the specific plot idea.

The only stories and novels I've written are science fiction and fantasy, about 180 stories and 37 books over the years since 1951. I am around 45 years old. Yes, I certainly hope to keep on writing; in fact I just sent off two novels, two new ones, to Doubleday, one of them in collaboration with Roger Zelazny. For a year-and-a-half I've been doing research on a religious s-f novel to be called, TO SCARE THE DEAD, but so far I can't get actually started on chapter one. That often happens; beginning a novel is the hardest part.

Again, thank you for writing, and I hope you enjoy SOLAR LOTTERY.

Very cordially,

Philip K. Dick

Philip K. Dick
2461 Santa Ysabel Ave
Fullerton
Calif 92631

October 11, 1975

Dear Brad,

Thank you for your most astute letter. Yes, years ago when I was writing such fantasy stories as "The Father Thing" I wrote several of that sort...you know, it was twenty years ago, I just realized! There was a market for them in those days, the Magazine of Fantasy & Science-Fiction, when Tony Boucher was editor. That's how I started my career, with such short fantasy stories, but then the market disappeared and I turned to science fiction entirely. First I turned to stories, and then the market dried up for that, too, so I turned to novels.

Many of us science-fiction writers wanted to do fantasies, but alas, when we wrote them we found we had no place to sell them. There was no way to make a living on them, to financially support ~~am~~ wife and child. John W. Campbell, Jr., the editor of Analog, brought out a wonderful fantasy magazine called Unknown, but in the early 'forties it went under. He tried to revive it after World War Two, but couldn't get any kind of good circulation for it. The editor of Galaxy, Horace Gold, brought out a fantasy magazine called Beyond in the 'fifties, but it, too, folded. So we all had to get behind science fiction, whether we liked it or not. I liked it, but not as much as fantasy.

You are quite right in the two points you make about "The Father Thing," first, that it makes its point without bloody events, and second, that it's set in the midst of the everyday world and by reason of this is all the more horrifying. I think when horror breaks through into the everyday world it is at its worst, don't you? In one story I wrote, a man starts off for work, and walks through a spider web; the spider tries to call to him, to tell him that he is in danger, but he steps on the spider anyhow. And goes on to work. There, in the midst of the workaday world, is this spider trying to talk to this man, and the man won't listen. In another story I wrote, called "Roog," a dog barks to warn the family that roogs are coming to get them, creatures from another world. First these creatures are stealing the garbage, pretending to be garbage men. Again, the humans won't listen. In another story I wrote, a child buys a toy airplane which, when he gets it home, enslaves him, gives him orders, tries to use him to take over society...finally, when all seems lost, the child's other toys destroy the airplane. So you can see that this was a pattern in my early writing. Now I'm just doing science fiction novels...it makes me very happy to know that some of my early fantasy stories are still being read; so thank you for writing!!

Cordially,

Philip K. Dick
Philip K. Dick

2461 Santa Ysabel Ave
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October 14, 1975

Dear Ann,

Thank you for your letter, which just now reached me. You certainly have wonderful handwriting, if I may say so.

As to my story "The Father-Thing," the idea really came to me when I was a kid. My parents were divorced, and I sometimes didn't see my father for as long as five years at a time. When I did see him, he was always a stranger to me, different from what I remembered. I always remembered him as a kind man, but when I saw him again, he always seemed harsh and cruel. It was as if there were two fathers: the real one whom I remembered, and the "other" father who looked like mine, and said he was mine, but was really inhuman and a stranger. Later, as an adult, when I was beginning to write and sell fantasy stories (in the early 'fifties), it occurred to me that other people in childhood might have had the same experience, which is really a psychological one, having to do with memories and expectations. In the story, of course, I put it in fantasy form; which is to say, I made a psychological feeling actual, in terms of the boy's own real world.

No, Ann, I don't think anything like that could happen in the future, because this story is really not about the future but is a sort of projection outward into the real world of a psychological feeling. It is not a part of the future, not true science-fiction, but pure psychological fantasy. The way I would have handled it as a science-fiction story or novel would have been to invent a plot in which invaders from other planets are imitating human beings, probably with the idea of conquering Earth. Or they could be clever robots designed to replace actual humans, looking exactly like them, for the purpose of infiltrating Earth. This is a standard plot in science-fiction. I admit that the line between fantasy and science-fiction is not clear, but this is how I would handle it in terms of the future. I would say, "Maybe someday in the future, a non-human race enters Earth in disguise, replacing ordinary human beings." I would have to tell, then, something about this non-human race, and let the reader catch a glimpse of the whole picture: where they are from, what their master plan is. I sort of hate to write such stories, though, because it is more than likely that if there are extra-terrestrial non-human races from other planets interested in us, they are not hostile but rather friendly. They probably would help us, rather than hurt us. The alien-as-enemy is a theme much overworked by writers. Perhaps, in truth, they might be god-like, and give us enormous help.

Again, thank you for writing me about the story.

Cordially,

Philip K. Dick
Philip K. Dick
2461 Santa Ysabel Ave
Fullerton, Calif 92631

October 11, 1975

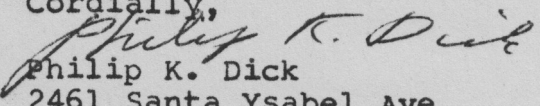
Dear Jeff,

Thanks for complimenting my story, "The Father-Thing," and thanks, too, for writing me about it. That's an early story of mine, written about twenty years ago. I am really very pleased to know that it's still being read. I believe I've seen the book that you have, with "The Father-Thing" in it. It's a good collection.

You raise an important point: where does an author get his ideas? People ask me that all the time, and I've gotten so I wince when they do, because frankly I don't know where I get them. This is a very serious problem, because sometimes I can't get an idea, no matter how hard I try. I've published about 180 stories and about 37 novels, over a period of -- let's see. 1951 to now; how long is that? Twenty-four years or so. You'd think that by this time I had a formula for getting ideas, but I don't. In a way, even though I'm writing science fiction and fantasy stories and novels, I get my ideas from real life. This may sound strange, but let me give you an example. When I was in high school my geometry teacher used to flap her arms when she talked, and it used to sort of frighten me. I mean, she seemed mechanical, like a robot, as if the key were wound up too tight, and there she stood, flapping and squeaking away at us kids. One day I got the peculiar fantasy that if I watched her long enough, I'd see the spring inside her go bwaaangggggg! and her head would fall to one side and she'd become silent, like a toy does when it breaks, a kid's toy. Years later, when I started writing science fiction, a basis for much of my writing was a preoccupation with the idea that maybe some of the people we see and know aren't really people at all, but instead are clever machines built to resemble people. In my stories, this turns out to be true, quite often; I call these clever machines simulacra, because they deliberately simulate human life. Well, the idea for all the novels and stories I wrote along this line comes from sitting every day for a whole semester watching this odd teacher and wondering when the spring would break. You see?

I began writing while I was a high school student. I'd do it at my desk, pretending I was doing homework. My teachers, when they found out what I was really doing, told me it was a waste of time. Well, I was in the process of beginning a life-long career. I wonder what they'd think now, thirty years later, to know I made a profession out of it!

Cordially,


Philip K. Dick
2461 Santa Ysabel Ave
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October 7, 1975

Dear Tony,

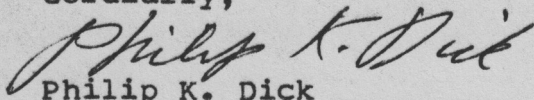
Thank you for your letter. It's fascinating to us science-fiction writers to hear that we and our work are being studied in the schools, now. A few years ago that wasn't so. When I went to high school (say around 1945) none of the teachers approved of science-fiction. I remember my geometry teacher grabbing a copy of Astounding Stories that I had on my desk and glaring at it with rage before she returned it to me.

Most s-f writers had a vivid imagination in their youth, and had trouble figuring out how to apply this imagination in terms of earning a living. In a way you could say we're a bunch of misfits! As we grew up, no one shared our dreams and fantasies and we were sort of loners, because of this. But things have improved. In an effort to make our fantasies understandable to others, we took to writing them down in story form. I was doing that in high school. My teachers yelled at me for doing it. "You're wasting your time," one of them told me. But now it's my entire career, and has been since 1951 when I sold my first story. I've sold something like 37 novels and almost 200 stories (I forget the exact figure).

I presume that the story of mine that you read is "The Father-Thing," right? Well, there is a perfect example of a story based on a fantasy of mine: that my father wasn't really my father, but was actually a stranger. I always had that feeling when I was a little kid growing up, so when I became an adult, and was writing stories, I put that childhood feeling --almost a fear-- into story form. A lot of the stories which I and other s-f writers write are based on such childhood feelings and fears. This is true, for instance, of much of what Ray Bradbury writes. I've talked to him about it, and he expresses this same view which I am expressing. We're still sort of kids, we s-f writers. Writing s-f doesn't pay very much money, by the way. We write it for fun, mainly, not for profit. We all enjoy our work, and we all know one another. Every year or so we get together in world-wide conventions. I have met or written to almost every major American s-f writer, and consider many of them my best friends.

Thank you again for writing. Maybe you'll do some writing of your own, too, if you're interested this much. Try it; it's fun.

Cordially,



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